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A SNAKE BREEDS A ST. PATRICK FARTHING

By

ERIC P. NEWMAN

THE LEGEND that St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland, as detailed on St. Patrick coins, may not be true, but it seems that one of the snakes has recently had its revenge by giving birth to a "new variety" of St. Patrick farthing. Since St. Patrick coins are collected in America as currency introduced by Mark Newby into Colonial New Jersey in 1682, it is necessary to determine if this "new variety" is venomous or if it has merely been hibernating for almost three hundred years.

Two specimens of this hitherto unknown St. Patrick farthing struck in silver have come to my attention. Both appeared separately in 1962 in England and were promptly purchased and brought to America. However, their close association with the recently described forgeries of the Oak Tree shilling (Fabrication OD)¹ is provocative. One silver St. Patrick piece was acquired



New forgery of the St. Patrick farthing in silver.

directly from a small English dealer in a group of coins containing two forged Oak Tree shillings and no other Massachusetts silver. The other was offered for sale in a group of virtually worthless coppers by a part time dealer visiting his customer in a London hotel room. The same customer was soon thereafter offered through the mail from England a forged Oak Tree shilling. The St. Patrick farthings were both sold as genuine and priced accordingly.

An innocent purchase of a forgery is understandable and this has happened to many. The question which is difficult to answer is why some are willing to buy fakes knowing that they are buying questionable coins. In the Glendining sale of October 31, 1962, Lot 313 was described as follows: "U.S.A. Massachusetts, Oak Tree shilling, 1652 (this piece is from unrecorded dies and may be a fabrication). Very fine." In spite of this warning this piece was not withdrawn but was sold at auction for £12 which is far below its value as a genuine piece and far above its virtual worthlessness as a fake. Other specimens of the Oak Tree shilling forgery were readily sold for similar prices to Americans even with a disclosure of their questionability.

Are some enthusiasts so naive as to think that they can buy a piece from unpublished dies from a numismatically experienced person for a fraction of the normal market value? Do they believe that such a seller is so inept as to part with what he knows is an unrecorded type without inquiring of someone who might clear up the matter? Do they believe that even if the coin is a fake it will have value as such? Strangely enough the answer to each question often seems to be in the affirmative. By buying fakes at any price more forgery is being encouraged.

¹Eric P. Newman, "A Dangerous Oak Tree Shilling Copy Appears," *The Numismatist*, Vol. 76 (Feb., 1963), p. 147; *Coin World*, Feb. 8, 1963, p. 3.

Is the St. Patrick Farthing American?

Before discussing the "new variety" it is well to analyze how the St. Patrick farthing became a part of the American series and if it really belongs there. In 1858 Hickcox omitted any mention of St. Patrick pieces. In 1859 Dickeson only mentioned the use of St. Patrick halfpence in Colonial Jersey (p. 113), but made no reference to farthings. In 1875 Crosby's chapter on the subject was entitled "The St. Patrick or Mark Newby Halfpence," but he did not undertake to distinguish as to denomination between the large and the small St. Patrick pieces because of his uncertainty as to the history of or the reason for their original Irish use.²

Jonathan Swift, in his third Draper's letter dated August 25, 1724, had left confusion whether both sizes were considered halfpence when in comparing 1722-24 Wood's halfpence (120 grains) to 1680 Irish halfpence (110 grains) he said: "And the great St. Patrick's half penny is yet larger than either." Swift's customary style in a tirade is full of redundancy and he was obviously referring only to the great St. Patrick piece as the halfpenny rather than indicating that coins of both sizes were halfpence.

Authors which Crosby quoted merely speculated about the coins. By 1899 when Herbert A. Grueber's *Handbook of the Coins of Great Britain and Ireland in the British Museum* appeared, it was known that the large St. Patrick piece (142-48 grains) was a halfpenny, that the small St. Patrick piece (77-105 grains) was a farthing, and that both had been circulating in the Isle of Man in 1678 and 1679 before they were specifically demonetized by an Act of the Tynwald on June 24, 1679. Every subsequent American catalog has included both the halfpenny and farthing as part of the early American series apparently because Crosby mentioned both sizes, but without considering what Crosby would have done if he had known the facts discovered after the publication of his book. A re-analysis is therefore in order.

In West Jersey on May 3, 1681, and prior to the arrival of Mark Newby, the Court, in settling the rates at which official English coins would circulate in Burlington ordered that "King's copper farthing" should pass for one halfpence in local currency and correspondingly the King's halfpenny should pass for a penny.³ English silver was to pass in local exchange at one and a half times English standard. English copper coins were therefore acceptable at a higher rate than English silver, in spite of the former's lack of intrinsic value. At the first session of the West Jersey General Free Assembly which began November 21, 1681, the current pay value of all English coins in West Jersey was set at one and a half times their English standard, thus correcting the inequity in the earlier order relating to Burlington.

When Mark Newby migrated from Dublin, Ireland, to the Camden, New Jersey, area in November, 1681, he apparently had St. Patrick coppers with him because by May 8, 1682, he convinced the General Free Assembly of West Jersey to pass the following well known Act:

"That Mark Newbie's half-pence, called Patricks half-pence, shall, from and after the said eighteenth instant pass for half-pence current pay of this Province, provided he the said Mark, give sufficient security to the Speakers of this House, for the use of the General Assembly from Time to Time, being, that he the said Mark, his Executors and Administrators, shall and will change the said half-pence for pay Equivalent, upon demand: and provided also, that no Person or Persons be hereby obligated to take more than five Shillings in one Payment."

The specific wording of the May 8, 1682, Act used "half-pence" four times and does not make any reference to farthings or to other coins to circulate in proportion. The fact that a tract of realty had to be pledged to secure redemption at any time shows that even the large coppers were over-valued.

²Sylvester S. Crosby, *Early Coins of America* (Boston, 1875), p. 135; Aquila Smith, "History of Mark Newby Pieces," *American Journal of Numismatics*, Vol. 7 (Oct., 1872), pp. 9 and 25.

³Francis B. Lee, "The Colonial Jersey Coinage from an Historical Standpoint," *American Numismatic and Archaeological Society of New York Proceedings and Papers* (New York, 1893), p. 32.

For people who had specifically regulated English halfpence (175 grains) and farthings (87½ grains) one year before, it is inconceivable that the Act was regulating two sizes of St. Patrick coins. The Act definitely would have mentioned the St. Patrick farthing if it was to be given legal tender status. The November 21, 1681, law relating to the local value of English coinage was repealed on May 18, 1682, eliminating any conflict between St. Patrick halfpence and English copper coin.

Mark Newby must have put at least 14,400 St. Patrick halfpence into circulation in West Jersey because when he died in 1683 there were claims against his estate in the amount of £30 for the coppers.⁴ The archaeological evidence also supports the conclusion that only St. Patrick halfpence were circulated in Jersey. It was reliably stated in 1845 "Newby lived on the farm in Newton since owned by Jos. B. Cooper, Esq., where many of the Patrick halfpence have been ploughed up."⁵ I know of no find of any St. Patrick farthings in the area.

The above facts lead to the conclusion that only St. Patrick halfpence are Mark Newby coins belonging in the American series and that St. Patrick farthings have no legal or actual basis for being considered in the American series. The big Irish brother left home and established himself with legal tender status in West Jersey. The little Irish brother stayed home. The big brother is Irish-American and the little brother is just Irish. This distinction seems appropriate because the "new variety" is a farthing with really no American significance.

The "New Variety"

In examining the lettering on the "new variety" some very unusual observations can be made. The word QUIESCAT is in thin letters compared to PLEBS in thicker letters; likewise, the word REX is in thin letters compared to FLOREAT in thicker letters. This is strange and unnatural.

The letter E appears four times, each one differing from the others. The letter S appears twice on the St. Patrick side, each having a different shape from the other. The letter R appears twice on the King David side, each having a different shape. An examination of normal farthings shows that letter punches were used to cut the basic lettering into the dies and this procedure would not produce fundamental variances in the shape of the same letters. This leads to the conclusion that the "new variety" was produced from dies in which all letters were hand cut and not punched. This is abnormal.

A strange characteristic of the coin in question is the placement of three jewels on the lower inside portion of the large crown. In an examination of many varieties of farthings it can be noticed that this area was routinely hatched in to resemble a velvet lining. Jewels in the wrong place are inexplicable except if a copyist had to improvise without having a clear specimen to work with.

The only two published listings of die varieties of St. Patrick farthings⁶ are listings of punctuation only and do not include the punctuation QUIESCAT:PLEBS found on the "new variety." They do include the punctuation FLOREAT:REX; but not for a type struck in silver. Unfortunately the second listing of farthing varieties is only an unimproved copy of the Crosby list. An expanded die variety list has been worked on by Walter Breen, but it is not far enough along and photographs of varieties are lacking. Neither die of the "new variety" is known.

In the "new variety" the first animal below St. Patrick's outstretched hand looks like a jet age double swept-back wing aircraft rather than a bird

⁴W. A. Whitehead, "Mark Newby and His Copper Coin," *American Journal of Numismatics*, Vol. 7 (Oct., 1872), p. 30; Sylvester S. Crosby, *Early Coins of America* (Boston, 1875), p. 135; Francis B. Lee, "The Colonial Jersey Coinage from an Historical Standpoint," *American Numismatic and Archaeological Society of New York Proceedings and Papers* (New York, 1893), p. 32; Frank H. Stewart, *Mark Newby*, published by Gloucester County, N. J., Historical Society (Woodbury, N. J., 1947), p. 10; *Leamington and Spicer's Grants and Concessions, 1604-1702* (New Jersey Laws).

⁵Isaac Mickle, *Reminiscences of Old Gloucester (New Jersey)*, Phila., 1845.

⁶Sylvester S. Crosby, *Early Coins of America* (Boston, 1875), p. 138; Philip Nelson, "The Coinage of Ireland in Copper, Tin and Pewter," *British Numismatic Journal*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 169.

or insect. The direction it is going is anyone's guess. This error was apparently due to copying an unclear copper specimen.

One specimen of the "new variety" in silver weighs 110½ grains and the other 80½ grains, an enormous differential. Previously known genuine St. Patrick farthings in silver weigh from 107 to 123 grains so the range indicates that the silver pieces are more of a pattern than an issue for circulation. The specific gravity of the new specimens is normal, the first specimen being 9.6 and the second specimen 10.1. If the King David side is the obverse with the top of the crown pointing upward, then, after rotation on a vertical axis, the reverse on both pieces is about ten degrees clockwise. It would therefore appear that the two new specimens were struck during the same die setup. The offset is greater than any other genuine specimen examined.

Each specimen of the "new variety" differs on the edge. The first specimen has its edge notched to resemble reeding in a very crude manner. The notches are unevenly spaced, nonuniform in depth, and nonuniform in width, all obviously filed and cut in by hand. The second specimen has no edge milling at all, the edge being partly round, partly pointed, and partly squared off.

Every other copper and silver St. Patrick farthing examined (about a hundred) shows indented, vertical, and uniform edge milling or engraving spaced about 1/32nd inches apart. Milling on all genuine pieces is also confirmed by Crosby's findings. The milling could only be accomplished by the planchets being squeezed and rolled between fixed and movable bars in a milling machine used in England as early as 1662 and known today as the Castaing machine because of improvements to it worked out in 1685 by the French engineer, Castaing.⁷

Both specimens of the "new variety" are therefore lacking in proper edge treatment and in one specimen improper edge treatment is used. This is in the writer's opinion sufficient evidence to diagnose the "new variety" as a modern forgery. While other discrepancies give rise to justified challenge and suspicion, the failure of the forger to use a machine for edge milling after his tedious and skillful die cutting of the surfaces was a trifle he did not count on as being material. The close association of the date of appearance and in the distribution sources of both the forged Oak Tree shilling and the "new" St. Patrick farthing in silver, provides very strong circumstantial evidence of an identical forger. Perhaps he has made other types of coins.

In trying to combat counterfeiting of paper money in Colonial America it was often considered dangerous to point out defects in the counterfeits because the counterfeiter would promptly correct them. In the case of the St. Patrick farthing in silver it will serve no purpose for the forger to follow this lead and be a "die hard" as his "hardened dies" are now known.

Through the coöperation and kindness of Richard Picker of New York, Edmund J. Vaskas of Worcester, Mass., Walter Breen of Berkeley, Calif., David F. Spink of London, and Dr. Henry Fattel of North Bergen, N. J., the specimens of and the information about the St. Patrick forgery have been made available to me for study. I am most appreciative.

⁷Eric P. Newman and Kenneth E. Bressett, *The Fantastic 1804 Dollar*, (Racine, 1962), p. 29.

Oak Tree Shilling Forgeries: Comment and Rejoinder

[Editor's note: Gordon White, A.N.A. No. 21995, 41 Fenton Rd., Southbourne, Bournemouth, Hants., England, comments on Eric P. Newman's "A Dangerous Oak Tree Shilling Copy Appears," *The Numismatist*, February, 1963. Eric Newman's rejoinder follows.]

Comment

Electrotype copies of coins as we all know, are one of the biggest snags to collecting rare coins, but they are by and large, a legacy left over from the Nineteenth Century. We must live with them if only because they provide interesting material that would be otherwise unobtainable.

We should be prepared to meet up with them at all stages of coin collecting, but more especially when we collect ancient coins, such as Roman and

Greek silver and bronze coins, which seem to have been the pet subject of the bygone coin imitator. Perhaps the few remarks that follow may help to put them in their true light.

As it was my misfortune or otherwise to purchase the three Oak Tree shillings of Massachusetts, dated 1652, that appeared in England in April, 1962, and were the subject of an article by Eric P. Newman, in the February, 1963 *Numismatist*, I think it only right that a reply should be given here on this subject in general.

No one wishes to buy a very rare coin (and these Oak Tree coins are rare beyond any doubt), but if an electro is offered as such, then surely it is up to the conscience of the collector concerned whether he or she wishes to have such a copy in his or her collection. That all such copies should be made "illegal," however, does not get us over the hurdle that many thousands of them exist today, fortunately not in the American series, but most specifically in coins of the earliest times. Now why were these made? Just for profit, for fun? To deceive innocent collectors and others into thinking that they had a very rare coin at a very low price? You can answer "Yes" to all of these questions.

I would say that beyond question no reputable dealer (or collector for that matter), particularly wishes to display, or offer to sell, any copy of any coin; but such do turn up from time to time in old collections and many such pieces can be extremely interesting. Not all electros were made to deceive the unwary, many copies of rare coins having been made simply because there are not enough of the originals to go round to meet the demands of both students and numismatists everywhere. Who, for example, would refuse a copy of the very rare British Columbia ten or twenty dollar pieces of 1862 if they were offered? Again, the very rare Oxford crown of Charles I of England was copied, and it is a most beautiful copy too, because the demand for this piece was great and there was no other way possible to find a specimen for purposes of study. When examples of these rare coins turn up in the salesrooms the demand for them is there alright, not simply because it is an example of a rare coin, although this is quite sufficient as it is but because it really is a most beautiful work of art. We have all heard of the dekadrachms of Syracuse, many say that this is the world's most beautiful coin, but can we ever hope to own an original? Copies have been made in the past century to "fill the gap" and it is my belief that they do serve a useful purpose.

Fortunately experts in their own particular field are able to recognize false coins either by comparison with the genuine or by their special knowledge of a series. The British Museum keeps many hundred false coins for this very reason of comparison, and well known copies have been the subject of many books and articles.

It surely boils down to this: if a rare coin is offered at a very low figure, then its authenticity should be doubted, and the coin should be checked for its genuineness. These copies are not so difficult to distinguish, and I must say here that the "Oak Tree" shillings were recognized instantly for what they were. Anyone who has ever handled a genuine Massachusetts coin could tell the difference; luckily three were offered to me at the same time, and it did not take long to see that all three came from the same pair of dies. Although they were struck differently, they all came as copies from one coin.

It should be borne in mind that what is good is bound to have imitations. This applies to coins as to anything else. Becker the Forger began by making copies of ancient coins for museums, but they were so perfect that he found collectors gladly bought them. To this day a Becker forgery is a distinctive one, and not without great artistic merit. He confined his activities to the Greek and Roman period, and a book entitled *Becker the Forger* gives an accurate account of his works. He used to put his coins in a box attached to the wheel of his coach, so that after a number of journeys the specimens he made had the appearance of having circulated. But nothing can alter the fact that a genuine ancient coin not only shows its age, by cracks and wear on the edge of the coin, but does not have that "smooth" feel of an electro.

I do not believe that these copies are being made today, because the knowledge of coins has never been greater, nor would the demand for such be great enough to warrant the manufacture of such items.

Many a good collector has turned away from numismatics when he has found that a coin that was thought to have been genuine turned out to be a copy. This is to be much deplored and regretted, but stalwart collectors will meet these fakes for what they are—a challenge to their own knowledge and experience, plus the right to learn more about them, how they came to be made, where and when, and for what purpose.

If you are going to buy an electro then you should pay only a very small price for it, and be honest with yourself; mark it in your collection as a copy, then you not only do not deceive yourself, but others too will be interested for what it is. Remember, too, that you should not buy a coin like this in the hopes that it will eventually turn out to be genuine, you will more often than not be disappointed.

Learn if you can by the failings of others by their mistakes—not yours, spread knowledge of all fakes, exhibit them as examples of the doubtful ingenuity of man, show them for what they are, and draw your own conclusions as to whether they are worth collecting or not. It is one of the fundamental “arts” of collecting anything that you should not run down another fellows’ collecting habits, but please let him decide whether he wants to include fakes and imitations in his collection. When he has greater experience he will know the answer to this. Try to guide those who do not know of copies by showing them the original plus the copy. Far better this than being out of pocket by making a purchase without having the added asset of knowing that copies exist. — GORDON WHITE

Rejoinder

I respect Gordon White for voluntarily identifying himself as the seller of three of the five Oak Tree shilling forgeries mentioned in my article in the February, 1963 *Numismatist* as I avoided using his name in the article. I did state, however, that he had concluded that the pieces were not genuine and sold them as electrotypes. It was also pointed out that they were struck copies from forged dies and not electrotypes as he still seems to believe. It is necessary for electrotypes to be made from pre-existing coins. Regardless of what kind of fakes these are, they were an unknown variety prior to 1962.

Mr. White's statement that “no one wishes to buy a very rare coin” (he classifies an Oak Tree shilling as such) is subject to challenge, particularly in America. In my opinion his statement undermines his entire thesis.

Let Mr. White find the diemaker of the Oak Tree shilling forgery and ask him what his motives were. — ERIC P. NEWMAN

Obituary

ALFRED M. KERNER, A.N.A. NO. 18209

Alfred M. Kerner, 53, passed away at his home in Bethlehem, Pa., on February 19. Services were held in the Holy Ghost Church and interment was in the Holy Saviour Cemetery.

Born in Lower Saucon Township, Mr. Kerner moved to Bethlehem five years ago and worked in the Metallurgical Pyrometry Department of the Bethlehem Steel Company. Besides being a member of A.N.A. since 1950, he held membership in the Middle Atlantic Numismatic Association, the Monroe County Coin Club, the Bethlehem Coin Club, and currently was serving as Vice President of the Lehigh Valley Coin Club.

Al, as he was known to a large host of friends, specialized in commemorative half dollars and won numerous exhibition awards in Eastern Pennsylvania. His many collecting acquaintances in the Lehigh Valley area will miss his good advice and mourn the passing of a highly respected friend.

Surviving in addition to his widow, Beatrice (Myers) Kerner, are three brothers and a sister. — LEH

Did you send your contribution to the Lewis M. Reagan Memorial Foundation?